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SAN FRANCISCO BAY DELTA:
EPA releases 'action plan' for beleaguered estuary
Debra Kahn, E&E reporter
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U.S. EPA released goals Tuesday for helping the San Francisco Bay Delta meet Clean Water Act standards. The delta -- a provider of drinking water to 25 million people, habitat for 750 species and irrigation for 4 million acres of farmland -- is suffering from a number of ailments and existing state and federal programs aren't doing enough, EPA's Bay Delta Action Plan says.

"Despite much ongoing activity, [Clean Water Act] programs are not adequately protecting Bay Delta Estuary aquatic resources," it says.

The most important step for the agencies is to update the State Water Resources Control Board's 1995 water quality control plan, the report concludes. Adjusting the mandatory amount of water that must be flowing through the delta will also help on contamination, temperature, salinity and other issues.

"Over the last decade, there has been much regulatory activity related to contaminant stressors, including pesticides, selenium, mercury, and ammonia," the report says. "By contrast, the estuarine habitat water quality standard has not been updated for 17 years."

The state's Delta Stewardship Council has set a deadline of June 2014 to update the standard; EPA supports that timeline and will provide recommendations to the water board, the report says. Other recommendations include proposing a standard by next year for selenium discharges from cities, farms and oil refineries; setting water quality goals in Sacramento County urban streams for certain pesticides; ensuring that EPA's pesticide regulations take account of pesticides' effects on aquatic life; and restoring wetlands and floodplains to sequester contaminants and greenhouse gases, as well as protect the delta against floods, earthquakes and climate change.

The last goal is to support the development and implementation of the Bay Delta Conservation Plan, a state-federal effort to build tunnels under the delta where the Sacramento and the San Joaquin rivers converge. The tunnels would bring water south without running it through the delta, a move intended to help fish and farmers.

EPA officials said they would review the plans for the water project, with the aim of ensuring there is enough water for fish and other species. The plan has come under fire from environmentalists for not specifying how it will offset any negative environmental effects (E&ENews PM, July 25).

An environmentalist said the report wasn't groundbreaking but sets out parameters for the state in its planning.

"It points out two things that I think are very important: That those estuarine standards haven't been updated for 17 years, and that flows are a primary driver for the health of the ecosystem," said Barry Nelson, a senior policy analyst with the Natural Resources Defense Council.